

POWER STUDY

by

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CHAPTER ONE

“Holy snow cats! Will ya look at the crowd.” Janco whistled in amazement.

Although Janco had the annoying tendency to exaggerate, Ari agreed with his partner. “Must be a record.”

“They must think we’ll be easier to beat.” Janco touched the scar where the lower half of his right ear used to be.

Ari recognized Janco’s nervous gesture. He’d seen it a thousand times. “No worries. Take a closer look.” From where they stood next to the castle, they could see the training yard was filled with soldiers practicing with swords and knives and bow staffs. “Greenies mostly. A few veterans, but nobody you can’t handle. Well...” Ari eyed Captain Francesca. She was deadly with a knife.

“You call that a pep talk?” Janco grumbled. “Why are we here anyway? This isn’t our job. It’s Valek’s.”

Valek was the chief of security for the vast intelligence network of the Territory of Ixia and the Commander’s right hand man. He had made a challenge to all the soldiers in the Commander’s Army: beat Valek in a fight with the weapon of your choice and win the right to be Valek’s second. Ari and Janco had teamed up with Maren and the three of them had bested Valek. Janco had found the loophole and Valek agreed the trio could be his seconds. For now. If another trio formed, then the new group would have to win a fight against Ari, Janco and Maren together.

Ari and Janco strode into the yard. Maren was already warming up. Her blond ponytail flashed in the morning sunlight as she practiced a bow kata. She twirled the five foot wooden bow staff with lethal accuracy.

“Consider it an honor,” Ari said. “We get to weed out the greenies. Anyone who beats one of us wins the right to face Valek.” He knew he had said the right thing when a determined glint shone in Janco’s eyes.

Janco smiled with a predatory grin. “If anyone beats us. And I’m feeling disinclined to allow that to happen.”

The names of all the hopefuls were put into a bucket. Ari, Janco and Maren each picked a name and the matches began.

Those who faced Ari soon realized that, despite his large muscular size, he was quick with his broadsword. Able to hold the sword in his right hand and use his left for punching, he dispatched his first two opponents without breaking a sweat.

The third man chose the bow staff as his weapon so Ari’s next fight lasted a bit longer. Not as adept with

wielding a staff, he always worried he would break the bow into splinters.

“A block, a dodge, a spin. Come on, do you want to win?” Janco’s voice sang out over the din of shouts and clashes of steel.

Ari smiled. His partner liked to sing rhymes during a fight to keep his rhythm and to unnerve his opponent. It reminded Ari to pace his bow attacks, luring his attacker into a cadence. Temple strike, rib strike, temple, rib, temple, rib. Then a feint to the temple and blow to the exposed ribs. The young man went down as his air whooshed from his lungs.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Ari chugged a glass of water and picked the name of his next opponent from the bucket. The morning flew by in a series of matches. Each one unique, but all ending in defeat. Ari was pleased with his skills, but vowed to work on his bow katas.

When all the soldiers had a chance to fight, Ari, Janco and Maren compared notes.

Janco tried to bandage a nasty gash on his right forearm. “Francesca is the only one who got past my defenses,” he said. “She’s awesome with a knife. Valek will have a decent match against her.”

Maren pulled the bandage from Janco. “You’re making a mess. Let me.” Her long fingers deftly wrapped his arm. “I lost one sword match to Rye.”

“The greenie?” Incredulity laced Janco’s voice. “Did he compliment your hair or something? I know he’s good looking, but—Ow! That hurts.”

Maren finished tying Janco’s bandage with vicious delight. Ari listened to them bicker. Just like old times, he thought. Back when they had met in a storage room and practiced bow fighting with Yelena. Since earning their new positions, Ari hardly saw Maren. And he and Janco were often sent on separate missions. He didn’t like it. They were stronger together than apart.

The subject of Maren and Janco’s argument interrupted them. “When do I fight Valek?” Rye asked.

“Anxious to lose?” Janco asked. “He won’t be as easy to beat as our creampuff—Ow!”

By the murderous expression on Maren’s face, Ari would bet a month’s wages on her challenging Janco to a match and dumping him into a large mud hole. Before they could erupt into another argument, he said to Rye, “Valek is on a mission right now. You can face him when he returns.”

“When?” Rye asked.

“That’s when, sir.” Janco corrected. “Besides being none of your business, I don’t like your attitude. Maybe you should fight us first.”

“Anytime, sir.” Rye flipped him a salute.

Ari put a warning hand on his partner’s arm. “Cocky and insubordinate. Sound like anyone you know?” Janco huffed but kept his mouth shut. Good.

Ari studied the young man. He had a lean muscular build and was a few inches taller than Janco. A serious intensity radiated from his blue eyes and his dark hair and tanned skin tone suggested he was from one of the southern Military Districts.

“Valek will find you when he returns,” Ari said. “In the meantime, I recommend you practice as much as you can. Valek favors the broadsword. What’s your weapon?”

Rye pulled a long scimitar from his scabbard. Ari exchanged a glance with Janco. The scimitar was a Sitian weapon. No one in Ixia used that sword.

CHAPTER TWO

The young pup named Rye flashed his Sitian weapon. Wonderful. Janco loved surprises. Although he wasn't too keen on countering a scimitar, he understood how Rye had gotten through Maren's defenses. Sword fighting wasn't her forte, and the scimitar's long curved blade reached beyond her ability.

Janco rubbed his bandaged arm, debating if he should challenge Rye to a duel. Francesca's nasty little scratch still throbbed, and he vowed to sharpen his knife fighting skills. Chuckling at his own pun, he sobered when Ari shot him an annoyed frown.

"Where did you get your weapon?" Ari asked Rye.

The greenie glanced around the training yard. Most of the soldiers had dispersed, and the sun hovered on the horizon. Maren leaned on her bow staff, listening to them.

"My mother gave it to me. She said it was a family heirloom," Rye said.

"Family, eh?" Janco scratched the scar below what remained of his right ear. Whenever something didn't sound right or feel right, the spot would tweak with pain as if jabbed with a needle.

"Do you even know what it is?" The young man's tone bordered on snide.

"Course. I'm the only Ixian who's fought against one."

"The only Ixian, Janco?" Ari asked.

"Yeah. You can't call hacking at a scimitar with your broadsword fighting. Face it, Ari you have no finesse."

His partner sighed, but refused to counter. No fun. Janco enjoyed goading Ari into a verbal bout, and loved provoking him into a real fight. Ari was the best opponent around besides Maren.

Rye failed to be impressed by Janco's claims. "Since I've been assigned to the Commander's garrison, more than thirty soldiers have faced this weapon and lost."

That did it. Janco pulled his sword. "Come on puppy dog; show me what you can do."

Much to his chagrin, Rye could do quite a bit. The greenie launched into the match without hesitation, forcing Janco to back peddle and counter Rye's initial strikes.

The clang and ring of swords vibrated through the air. Janco moved to an internal cadence, testing the youth's skills.

"He's green and likes to preen." Janco feinted high and attacked low. Rye failed to take the bait, blocking Janco's strike. "Tends to brag and his feet do lag. Soon he'll be in a body bag." After a quick secession of jabs, he lunged.

Rye tripped as he shuffled back. Pressing his advantage, Janco stalked the greenie as he rolled away. The scimitar blurred with motion, keeping Janco at bay while the puppy regained his feet. Impossible.

“He’s old yet bold. Soon he’ll be turning into mold,” Rye sang.

How dare he! Janco increased the pace of his attack.

The fight lengthened until the light faded. Finally, Ari called the match a tie. Janco panted, staring at the greenie. It has been years since Janco failed to get past an opponent’s defense at least once. He was impressed, annoyed and furious all at the same time.

“Interesting,” Ari said. “Come back tomorrow. I want to see how you do against me.”

“Prepare to lose, sir.” Rye saluted and swaggered toward the barracks.

Ari clamped down on Janco’s shoulder before he could chase after the insolent puppy.

Unable to break his partner’s vice-like grip, Janco said, “He needs a good beating.”

“I doubt he would get it from you,” Maren said. She swiped blond hair from her gray eyes. “It was only a matter of time before he disarmed you.”

He sputtered in outrage when Ari agreed with Maren. “Back stabber. Disloyal—”

“Be quiet, Janco. I won’t be able to beat him either. Did you see how the scimitar moved?”

He closed his mouth and reviewed the match. Rye’s gawky jabs and clumsy footwork didn’t jive with the weapon’s lightening fast reactions and smooth counters. “The sword has a mind of its own.”

Maren laughed. “Only you would think that. Ari’s implying our greenie may be a magician and a spy from Sitia.”

Which would explain the Sitan weapon and his darker skin tone. “You’d think he would have disguised himself better.”

“May be a spy. ‘May’ being the key word.” Maren looked at Ari. “What’s next?”

“Hey,” Janco said. “How come you always ask him? He’s just the muscle. I’m the brains of this outfit.”

She ignored him. “Ari?”

“Can you do a little research into Rye’s background? Find out where he’s from and who his family is?”

“No problem.”

“Janco, I want you to follow the greenie around. See who his friends are and watch what he does with his free time.”

“Why do I get to baby-sit?” No answer. “Wouldn’t it look strange if I start hanging out at the barracks?”

“Good point.” Ari considered.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you people. Brains and brawn, I’m a talented guy.”

“Modest, too,” Maren muttered.

“Inventory is due and an annual maintenance inspection. That should be good cover.” Ari nodded as if the discussion was final.

Janco groaned, counting supplies and looking for splinters was drudge work. He brightened only when he imagined himself discovering a plot and single-handedly stopping the spies from carrying out their nefarious deeds.

“...listening?” Ari’s annoyed tone cut through his daydreams. “I said you’ll want to recruit a helper to watch Rye at night. I’ll check Valek’s files, I’m sure he has one of his intelligence operatives assigned to listen for any trouble in the barracks.”

“Why don’t we just use him the whole time?”

Maren huffed. “Brain Boy can’t figure it out. It’s called sleep. Everyone has to do it sometime.”

He drew a breath to retort, but Ari silenced him with a warning look. Grumbling, he trudged back to the castle to bathe, change clothes and eat dinner. It would take Ari a while to ferret out the operative’s name, so Janco headed to the barracks to baby-sit the greenie overnight.

Doing inventory would be high entertainment compared to watching a man sleep. Rows of bunk beds lined the entire first floor of the wooden barracks. The officer’s bedrooms were located on the second floor, but since Ari and Janco’s promotion to Valek’s seconds, they had rather extensive rooms in the castle.

Aside from the snores, coughs and creaks of floorboards from soldiers either leaving for or coming back from guard duty, the night remained uneventful.

Upon reflection, the early morning hours had been too quiet. There had been a lack of...substance. It was the best word to describe those hours, but he knew Ari wouldn’t understand. Ari would be too busy berating him.

Because when the substance returned, Rye was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Ari searched through Valek’s files. He muttered under his breath about his boss’ total disregard for alphabetical order. Although the files were probably organized in a secret way only Valek could decipher, knowing there was a method to the madness didn’t help Ari. Since Valek wouldn’t be back for a few weeks, it was up to him to comb through the piles, looking for information about Rye.

Maren’s review of the garrison’s commanding officer records failed to produce any details on the greenie besides his home Military District.

Why did trouble always come from MD-5? Ari wondered. The district had a bad reputation since General Brazell was caught trying to overthrow the Commander. And now Rye had transferred in from MD-5 last season.

A knock interrupted Ari’s musings. “Come in.”

Maren entered Valek’s office. “Have you been here all night?”

He glanced out the window in surprise. The sun hung a few inches over the horizon. “Guess so.”

“Find anything?”

“No.”

“Want help?”

“Sure. I’ve looked through all the piles on the floor and the left side of the conference table. Why don’t you search his desk?”

She wove her way through the heaps of books and stacks of papers with an athletic grace. Gray-colored rocks weighed down every pile. Valek was a classic pack rat. Ari shook his head. Trained as a soldier and scout, Ari learned to keep his minimal possessions packed in a small rucksack in case he needed to leave in a hurry.

The rustling of paper and tangy scent of ink filled the room. Ari and Maren worked for an hour in companionable silence—a rare and soothing break from Janco’s constant chatter.

“Found it,” Maren said. She hefted a thick dossier.

“Good.” Ari eyed the size of the file. “How old is he?” He joined her at Valek’s desk.

She flipped it open and scanned a few pages. “Twenty. But Valek has been keeping tabs on him since he reached puberty.”

“Is he a magician?”

“No evidence found.” Maren sorted through the papers. “Although Valek suspects Rye’s father is originally from Sitia’s Moon Clan and he might have been spying for Sitia.”

“Have been?”

“He disappeared four years ago while on patrol. Rye’s family lives near the Sitian border and his father was a border patrolman.”

The man could have been involved in illegal border crossings. “Anything else?”

“Rye’s father has either returned to Sitia or was a victim of foul play. No evidence to suggest either one. Rye is an only child. Valek assigned one of his men to keep an eye on him and his mother. No suspicious activities in the last four years. And when Rye enlisted, Valek had him transferred to the Commander’s garrison.”

Ari considered the information. Perhaps the greenie’s father was a smuggler and stole the scimitar from Sitia. It’s possible the Sitians discovered it missing, waited for the father to return to Sitia, and killed him. “Did Valek interview the mother and son?”

Maren gave him a grim smile. “Of course. They knew nothing.”

Ari felt a twinge in his heart for Rye. Valek’s interview methods were brutal and reliable. Interesting the boy would enlist after suffering through an interview session.

A loud bang jolted Ari from his thoughts. Janco stood in the doorway. By the wrinkled uniform, wild hair and hang-dog look on his partner’s face, Ari knew the news would be bad.

“I’ve lost him,” Janco said.

“Figures,” Maren said.

“Wasn’t my fault. I had my eyes on him the whole time!”

“While your brain slept? Oh, I forgot – you don’t have a brain.”

Before they could launch into an argument, Ari asked Janco what had happened. His partner rambled on about some kind of substance or lack of substance. Either way the end result was the same. “Did you find any tracks?”

“The dirt around the barracks is too hard packed, and none of the gate’s guards reported seeing anyone.” Janco pulled at his goatee. “The outer walls are too sheer to climb. No one has seen him, and he didn’t report for duty.”

“Could he still be in the castle complex?” Maren asked.

“Unlikely,” Ari said. “If he could slip past you unseen, he could exit the complex without being noticed. Although we should make sure before we go.”

“Go where?” Janco asked.

Ari waited. His partner tended to speak before thinking and if Ari gave him a minute he would figure it out for himself. Unfortunately, not every one knew him as well, and Janco’s quick responses often led to trouble.

“Tracking mission.” Janco rubbed the scar below his right ear. “Which direction do you think Rye headed?”

“East toward home.”

“The greenie seemed smart. Do you really think he’d run home?” Maren asked.

“Do you have any better ideas?” Ari asked.

No response from either of them. Maren volunteered to conduct a castle-wide search for Rye while Ari and Janco headed to their rooms to prep for the mission. Their suite was down the hall from Valek’s. Janco’s gaze lingered on his bed, and he ran a hand over the pillow.

“I didn’t sleep either. We’ll have to catch a few on the road,” Ari said as he packed his rucksack.

Janco sighed and shoved supplies into his pack. “Should we bring the orange, yellow and red camo? The leaves are starting to change.”

“No. They’re still on the trees. Bring the green and browns – we’ll be staying on the ground.” He zipped up his bag, and tried to calculate how far Rye might have traveled. “When did you notice he was gone?”

Janco squinted. “He was gone at dawn. Hey! That rhymes. I could use it when I fight.” He practiced a variety of rhyming combinations.

Ari ignored him as he calculated how far Rye could travel in three hours. Far enough, and if he chose the wrong direction, catching up to the greenie would be almost impossible.

When they had finished packing, they returned to Valek’s office to wait for Maren’s report. Ari endured Janco’s fidgeting for an hour before she showed.

“Nothing. The castle’s clean,” she reported.

“Did you check—”

“Yes, Janco. I checked all your hiding places.”

“Even the—”

“Storage rooms.”

“And the—”

“Servants’ quarters. And the little nook you found near the dungeon.”

Ari suppressed a chuckle at Janco’s chagrined expression. “Good work, Maren. You’re in charge until we get back.”

“Swell. What should I tell Valek when he returns?”

“If we don’t come back, send him east.”

Janco shot him a concerned look. “Do you think we’ll need him?”

“If there’s magic involved, he’d be our best defense.”

“That’s not fair,” Janco said.

Ari knew better than to ask what wasn’t fair, but Maren didn’t.

“Valek gets everything. Immunity to magic, Yelena, super assassin skills—”

“We’re wasting time.” Ari shouldered his pack. “Let’s go.”

They traveled east through the Snake Forest, stopping only to check for signs of Rye. Someone had passed through here a while ago, but it was difficult to determine who. When the sun set, they made camp near Lake Keyra. Janco wilted under the weight of his pack and deep lines of exhaustion etched his face.

“I’ll take first watch.” Ari offered after they ate dinner.

Janco flashed him a grateful smile and collapsed onto his bed roll. Ari moved away from the small camp fire to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. He circled their campsite, halting every ten steps to listen for odd noises. Ari doubted they would encounter trouble so early in their search.

When the moon rose, he returned to the dying campfire. Embers pulsed with a weak glow and Ari bent to add wood, stirring the fire to life. A small flame erupted.

Then the world paused. All the nighttime noises ceased. Movement froze. But it seemed only Ari was affected. The single flame had tripled in size by the time Ari reconnected with the world around him.

A shuffling step sounded behind him. He spun, reaching for his sword. It wasn’t in his scabbard. Men dressed in colorful robes surrounded Ari. They aimed their scimitars at him.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Ow! Go away!” Still half asleep, Janco swatted at the annoyance. It persisted, pricking him with sharp little jabs. The scar below his right ear tweaked in warning. “What the?” He jerked awake. A tall man wearing an obnoxious dress hovered over him. Although the garment was gaudy, Janco’s gaze had focused on the scimitar inches from his nose.

He rolled away, reaching for his sword, but his scabbard was empty. And now he had two men threatening him with their long blades. Liquid moonlight shone from the sharp metal.

Janco’s insides cramped for a moment. A painful contraction—his body’s reaction to his brain’s acknowledgement that he was seriously screwed. Then it eased. Calm and acceptance flowed. If this was the end, he’d make the most of it.

Glancing around, Janco spotted his partner kneeling in the middle of their camp with his oversized hands laced behind his curly head. Four other men flanked Ari.

“Get up.” The man closest to Janco ordered. The blue and gold stripes on his garment shimmered. “Hands behind your head.” Stripey poked Janco in the back. “Now join your friend.”

Janco shot Ari a poisonous glare as he knelt next to him. “What ja do, Ari? Fall asleep?”

“Ambushed,” Ari said in a flat voice.

Janco recognized the tone. If he gets the chance, Ari would make these men pay for ambushing them.

“We can take them. Three each. I’ll take the left,” Janco said. The men closed around them.

“They’re armed and we’re not,” his partner countered.

“Hasn’t stopped us before. And besides, if they wanted to kill us, we’d be dead by now and would be having an entirely different conversation. I wonder if I’d still be mad at you, or if we would talk in words or pictures. Maybe in smells. That would be cool.”

Their attackers glanced at each other in confusion. Good. It would keep them guessing. Janco drew breath to continue.

Ari interrupted, “Scimitars aren’t their only weapon. They’re magicians.”

His scar ached. Janco resisted the urge to rub it. “Magic.” He spat. “That’s not playing fair.”

“No one ever said life had to be fair,” Ari said.

“My mother did. Made me share with my—”

“Enough,” Stripey ordered. “No more jabbering. You will listen to me.” He frowned at them.

If it wasn’t for their colorful robes, the men would have blended into the darkness. Bald heads drank in the moonlight and bare feet stood in the classic fighting stance. Their family resemblance was unmistakable. Janco guessed the six of them were from the same Sitian clan. And since they favored the scimitar, they were probably from the Sandseed clan. Which, if Janco had the choice, wouldn’t be who he wanted to ambush him.

“We are searching for the same thing,” Stripey said.

“How do you know?” Janco asked.

“I read his mind.” The Sitarian pointed to Ari. “Yours was too...chaotic. Too many useless thoughts to wade through.”

A compliment or an insult? Janco guessed compliment and preened.

“Why are you after Rye?” Ari asked.

“His weapon is not a normal blade,” Stripey said.

“I knew it! I told you the sword had a mind of its own. Wait till Maren—”

“Quiet!” Stripey slashed his hand through the air, rendering Janco literally speechless. He struggled to talk, but no sound escaped Janco’s throat.

Ari huffed in amusement. “Wish I could learn that trick,” he muttered.

Janco gave him a pained look.

“Rye’s scimitar is called Pemba and she is very dangerous. Forged with blood magic long ago, Pemba seeks to control the one who holds her hilt. Rye has woken her, and, every time he draws blood with Pemba, she grows stronger.”

“What happens when she gains control of Rye?” Ari asked.

“She will use him to slaughter as many people as possible, drawing even more strength from their blood.”

Janco knew he hated magic for a reason. He struggled to make a sarcastic comment, but couldn’t produce a sound.

“Sword bad. Got it. So why attack us and not Rye?” Ari asked.

“Pemba has gained enough power to counter our magic. We tried to reclaim her last night in the soldier’s barracks, but could not.”

The lack of substance, Janco thought, was magic. He hadn’t dreamed it. And he couldn’t even gloat about it—what a horrible time to lose his voice.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Ari said.

“We need your help in reclaiming the scimitar.”

Janco’s scar burned. Something didn’t jive. Six well-armed men with at least one magician should be able to acquire one scimitar.

As if reading his thoughts—chaotic my ass—Stripey said, “We do not blend in, while you should be able to get close to your colleague and steal her.”

How did Stripey know this weapon was female? Janco studied the Sitians, trying to deduce their motives.

Ari shook his head. “No can do. Valek deals with anything involving magic. When he returns—”

“It will be too late. Pemba will be unstoppable.” Stripey’s grip tightened on his weapon.

Janco noticed the other five men copied their leader’s gesture. Interesting how they all held their scimitars at hip level and their fighting stances were mirror images of Stripey’s. His scar pulsed with pain,

reminding him of his mother poking him with her long fingernails, telling him to use his brain.

An illusion! If Janco could talk, he would have groaned aloud. Stripey was alone. The other five were a magical illusion. He had paid attention when Yelena told him about illusions. But how could he tell Ari?

“The answer’s still no,” Ari said.

“I was not asking.” Stripey stepped close to Janco. The sharp edge of his scimitar touched Janco’s throat. “You will recover Pemba, or your partner will lose his head.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Ari’s partner had a scimitar against his neck. He met Janco’s gaze. The Sandseed magician had offered him an ultimatum. Either do what he wants or Janco loses his head. Ari wasn’t sure if Janco’s frustrated expression was because of the circumstances—he hated to be left behind—or because the magician had taken away Janco’s ability to talk.

Ari began to think Janco’s plan to attack despite the fact they didn’t have weapons was a good one. He unlaced his hands and stood slowly.

“Careful or your friend dies,” the Sandseed said.

Janco’s fingers twitched. He was signaling Ari something about numbers. Five into one and something about an intrusion. Did Janco think there were five more Sandseeds on the way?

“Rye has taken Pemba east. If you hurry, you can catch up with him,” the Sandseed said.

“Won’t work,” Ari said.

“Why not?”

“The scimitar Pemba is already too strong for me. We’d have to go together.”

Janco gave him a pointed look. He was trying to tell Ari something. Finally he rolled his eyes and moved. Rolling backward and away from the blade, Janco kicked his leg and knocked the scimitar from the Sandseed’s hand. He jumped to his feet and tackled the man.

Ari spun, and went on the defensive. With his back to Janco, he slid his feet into a fighting stance. Balancing his weight on the balls of his feet, Ari waited for the other Sandseeds to attack. They stood staring at him with quizzical expressions then vanished.

“What the hel—”

“Finally! I can talk!” Janco said.

Ari turned. Janco held the Sandseed’s scimitar in his hand. The man lay on the ground, unconscious.

“Care to explain?” Ari asked.

“Didn’t you see my signals?”

“Yeah. But they didn’t make sense. Five into one and it’s an intrusion.”

“It’s an illusion! Five of them are an illusion.”

“That’s not the signal for illusion. This is.” Ari demonstrated the proper signal.

“That’s what I did.”

“No, you didn’t. You did a weird twisty thing with your pinky.”

“I had a scimitar at my throat. I’d like to see you try signaling under those conditions.”

Ari opened his mouth to retort, but thought better of it. They could argue for weeks and not resolve a thing. He changed tactics. “You did very well. You knocked him unconscious and stopped his magic.”

As expected, Janco preened.

Ari gazed at the magician on the ground. “How do we keep him from doing magic once he wakes up?”

“We could kill him. Magic’s illegal in Ixia.”

“But what if he’s right about this Pemba? We may need his help.”

Janco rummaged in his pack. “I’ve got sleeping potion and Valek’s goo-goo juice. We could keep him unconscious or loopy.”

“Then we’ll have to carry him with us. No, we need something to scare him into cooperating with us.” Ari searched his memory, but he didn’t know enough about magic or magicians.

Janco rubbed the scar where his right earlobe used to be. “How about the cure-all stuff Yelena told us about? The Sitians really hated that stuff.”

Ari smiled. “Curare. It would work. Do you have any?”

“No.” Then Janco grinned with pure mischievousness. “But he doesn’t know that.”

While waiting for the Sandseed to wake up, Ari and Janco packed up the camp and found their weapons. They poured water into a small glass vial, and readied a dart.

“Remember, this guy can read minds. So you can’t think about how we’re trying to trick him,” Ari said.

When the Sandseed stirred, Ari sat on his chest and pressed his knife to the man’s jugular.

“Janco figured out your illusion and he can do it again. So one hint of magic, and I’ll slice your throat.” Ari growled.

The Sandseed wheezed. “Can not...breathe.”

“That’s the least of your worries. You’re under arrest for using magic in Ixia.”

“Can not...hold me...I will...escape.”

“Not unless we run out of Curare. Janco, prick this bastard.”

Terror filled the man’s dark brown eyes as Janco aimed a metal dart at his face. A drop of clear liquid hung off the end.

“No! Wait...I have...a message...for you from...the Soulfinder.”

Soulfinder? The partners glanced at each other.

“Yelena...Zaltana.”

“He’s bluffing,” Janco said. “He knows this stuff will paralyze him and his magic. The dungeon guards will keep dosing him until they unwrap the noose from around his dead neck.”

“Sieges weathered...fight together...friends forever.”

Ari didn’t want to believe it. The Sandseed just recited the special message Janco had inscribed to Yelena on her switchblade. It had been written in a secret code, so the man couldn’t have learned it on his own.

“Is that the message?” Ari asked.

“No...proof.”

Ari removed his weight for the man’s chest, but kept his knife pressed to his skin. “Talk. Now.”

“Yelena sent me to enlist your help to recover Pemba.”

“If that’s the case, you need to seriously work on your people skills,” Janco said.

“I did not want to involve...strangers. I thought I could get the scimitar and return home without any problems.”

“But,” Ari prompted.

“Pemba has grown too strong for me. So I followed you from the castle.”

“Did you ever consider telling us this before you ambushed us?” Janco asked.

“I wanted to test you. If you had no clue about magic or could not defend yourself against my scimitar, you would have been of no use to me.”

“How’d we do?” Ari asked.

“I am...impressed. Most Sitians can not spot an illusion.”

Ari groaned to himself. “You shouldn’t have said that,” he said to the Sandseed.

“Ha! Hear that, Ari? I’m better than most Sitians.” Janco danced a little jig.

Ari tried to ignore him. “I’m still not happy about this. Valek’s the one who deals with magic.”

“But he is on a special mission for Yelena, and will not be back for months. Even you do not know where he is.”

Janco stopped dancing and Ari stood, pulling the Sandseed to his feet. If he knew about Valek, then he was legitimate.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Bour Sandseed.”

“Okay, Bour do you know where Rye is?”

“Yes.”

Janco rubbed his scar. “I’ve got a bad feeling about all this. Really bad.”

CHAPTER SIX

Janco’s ear pulsed with pain. It felt as if it had been jabbed by a red hot poker, but instead it had been caused by his instinct, warning him to danger. The one and only time he had failed to follow his gut instinct had resulted in losing the lower half of his right ear. At least, he hadn’t lost his head, which his opponent had been trying hard to do.

The whole situation with the Sandseed reeked big time, but he couldn’t figure a way around it. So Janco shook off his unease and shouldered his pack. He scouted through the Snake Forest, searching for signs of Rye’s trail. His partner, Ari stayed behind with Stripey the Sandseed. The magician claimed he knew where Rye was headed, but Janco didn’t trust him despite his proof that Yelena sent him. Plus Ari thought it best Stripey didn’t use his magic while in Ixia.

A magician in Ixia! Valek would be pissed. Then again, he would be more upset if he learned Janco and Ari hadn’t tried to stop this magical scimitar. The weapon even had a name—Pemba. Who names their swords and gives them magic anyway? Crazy Sitians. The Sandseed had a name, too, but Janco preferred to call him Stripey. If the man was going to wear a loud blue and gold striped robe, he was fair game.

Janco grumbled to himself as he connected the line of bent leaves and footprints. The lush greenery made it easy to discern the signs, but the thick forest could hide predators and ambushes.

He inhaled a lungful of moist earth and freshness. It was half way through the warming season, and newness shone on the bright leaves. This time of the year reminded Janco of his childhood days, avoiding chores and discipline to stalk in the woods. He had learned how to move through the forest without making a sound, and had enjoyed pouncing on the unsuspecting. Which, hopefully, he’d be able to do today with that cocky greenie.

After he was satisfied of Rye’s direction, he loped back to find Ari. He spotted the Sandseed without problem. They would need to find him better clothes.

“Report,” Ari said.

“The greenie’s running home to Mama. East,” Janco added for the Sandseed’s benefit.

“How far?” Ari asked.

“Half a day, thanks to Stripey Boy’s little ambush.”

Ari shot him a warning look, but Janco ignored him.

“Let’s go. Double time.” Ari hefted his pack.

“Double time?” Stripey asked.

Janco grinned. “I hope you’re in shape.”

They jogged through the forest with Janco in the lead. Ari’s steps drummed lightly behind him as they

ducked and dodged through the low hanging branches. The Sandseed's passage sounded like a herd of stampeding cattle.

Well into the evening hours, they stopped for a brief rest. Cuts and scratches laced the Sandseed's face, and small rips marked his robe, but otherwise he seemed no worse for wear.

By daybreak they had gained significant ground. Unfortunately they were too late to help a small group of border guards, who were on patrol and had encountered Rye.

"Report," Ari ordered the four men. They nursed various gashes and ugly slices left by Pemba.

"We stopped a Lieutenant for a routine check and to hear any news from the castle, sir," one of the men said. He pressed a bloody handkerchief to his forearm. "He wasn't one of ours, and he didn't have any transfer papers on him." The man stared at the Sandseed.

Janco leaned close and said, "He's my grandfather. He dressed himself this morning and we don't want to hurt his feelings."

Now the soldier gaped at him. Fun.

"Janco," Ari warned. "Continue."

"We followed regulations and tried to take him into custody for further questioning, when—"

"He pulled a wickedly sharp blade and disarmed you all." Janco flourished his arm as if striking with an invisible sword.

The man nodded.

"How long ago?" Ari asked.

"Two hours."

Ari nodded as if he already knew. "Direction?"

"East." Janco pointed to the spot where Rye had pushed through the underbrush, breaking a sapling's branch.

"How do you know our quarry caused the damage and not these soldiers?" Stripey asked him.

Janco paused. Interpreting trail signs and reading clues from his surroundings was second nature to him. In his mind's eye, Janco saw a vision of Rye still gripping the bloody scimitar as he navigated the tight trail. It took him a moment to translate what triggered the vision into physical details.

"The damage to the brush is limited to three feet, suggesting one man's passage. And the break-off of the branch has a point on this side, meaning he went east," he explained.

"If he heads northeast, there's a small town along the edge of the forest, sir," the soldier said.

Ari ordered the men to return to their station for medical treatment. Janco once again led the way, following Rye's trail, which turned to the northeast.

"Pemba has fed on the blood of those soldiers, and her strength has grown," the Sandseed said. "We must hurry."

“What do you think we’re doing? Going for a stroll?” Janco snapped.

Ari didn’t say a word, but Janco sensed his partner’s displeasure. He increased his pace, and soon they arrived at the edge of the town. Before stepping from the forest, Ari pulled him back.

“Let’s not be too hasty,” Ari said, consulting a paper. “Rye probably knows we’re after him.”

“Pemba will alert him to intruders, and to any magic use,” the Sandseed said.

Janco considered. Ambushes and magical illusions wouldn’t work, but more mundane tactics might. “We have darts and sleeping juice. How close is too close?”

“You have a plan?” Ari asked in surprise.

He bristled at the insult. “Who saw through Stripey’s illusion? Me. Who thought of using Curare—”

“Of course,” Stripey said. “I had forgotten. We can use Curare to paralyze Rye and sever any magical connection with Pemba.” He smiled, flashing white teeth.

Janco exchanged a look with Ari. Should they fess up? Ari nodded.

“About that Curare stuff,” he said. “We...ah...lied. We don’t have any. Would sleeping potion work?”

Stripey’s smile died. “It depends on how strong Pemba is. If she has complete control of Rye, nothing but Curare will work.”

“Magic sucks,” he said.

Stripey stilled as he gazed at Janco. “The benefits far outweigh the abuses,” he said. “You, for example, could benefit from a session with me.”

“Hold on there, Stripey Boy. Don’t you try any of that story-weaving mumbo jumbo on me. I’m perfect just the way I am.”

A strangled cry emanated from Ari. He covered it by clearing his throat. “Let’s focus on the problem at hand. The house Rye grew up in is on the southeast side of town.” Ari peered at the paper in his hand. “We need to confirm he’s there first.”

“He’ll recognize us right away,” Janco said. “Unless we recruit one of the town’s guard?”

“Good idea. Once we know where he is, we can entice him out, but how?” Ari rubbed a large hand on his head as if he could force a plan to form.

Janco tried to put himself in Rye’s place. It wasn’t difficult to do. “He’s a young hot shot. We just need some loud mouth braggart at the local pub to claim he’s the best swordsman in town. Word spreads like fleas in tiny communities. Eventually Rye’ll get bit. He’ll show up, wanting to prove the big mouth wrong with his magic scimitar.”

“Pubs are busy places, lots of people so Pemba’s magic won’t pick us up,” Ari said. “We can disguise Bour to blend in better.”

Bour? It took a moment for Janco to realize Ari referred to Stripey.

“Once you shoot him with the sleeping potion, I can use my magic to help,” Stripey added.

“Only use magic if we give you permission,” Janco said.

“One problem to our plan,” Ari said. “There will be other challengers before Rye shows, and the loud mouth must be able to prove himself.” He gazed at Janco. “I doubt a local guard will have the skills to thwart all opponents, and I have better aim with the dart gun.”

Janco groaned. He had walked right into this one.

His partner cocked his head, studying Janco with a thoughtful expression. “I think you’ll look good as a blond.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ari suppressed the desire to smack Janco upside the head. Sitting in a dark corner of the Rouillard tavern, he watched his partner scratch his scalp for the millionth time. Janco’s new blond hair and goatee blended in amid the local bar dwellers. With a uniform change and a touch of make-up, Janco’s facial appearance had also been altered. The dye they used on his hair, though had caused an allergic reaction and if Janco didn’t stop scratching, he would ruin his disguise.

The Sandseed magician waited for them outside. His dark skin was impossible to mask so he found a shadow near the tavern’s back entrance to hide in.

Janco gestured with his beer mug and boasted of his swordsmanship to any and all. A bunch of the town’s soldiers lounged nearby. Ari had briefed the guards, and Captain Kenton had confirmed Rye was inside his mother’s house. Rye flashed the Captain an old leave form, but the Captain ignored the expiration date on the papers.

The guards then introduced Janco to the tavern’s occupants as their newest recruit. In Ixia, only guards were allowed to wear swords. However, many of the younger Ixians had joined the reserve forces. In case of a war, the Commander would call the reservists into active duty. One of the perks to being a reservist was permission to carry a weapon.

Guards and reservist tended to frequent Ixia’s taverns. Friendly and not-so friendly scrimmages would erupt from time to time, but with so many guards around all the matches stayed clean.

With everyone in position, the bait had been set. Now all Ari and Janco needed was the fish, but, so far, Rye had failed to appear.

“...no one is faster than me,” Janco said. He slammed his beer mug on the bar, splashing yellow liquid onto his neighbor’s arm.

“With what? Your mouth?” someone called out as snickers erupted.

“No, he’s the fastest pants wetter in all of Ixia,” another voice added. More laughter.

Janco reached for his mug without looking and knocked it over, dumping the contents into the same man whose sleeve he had doused. The Lieutenant stood. He towered a foot over Janco.

“Okay big mouth.” The Lieutenant growled. “Time to prove yourself.” He pulled a broadsword from his scabbard.

The top of the bar was cleared off, and everyone stepped back. Silence descended. The Lieutenant hopped onto the top of the narrow bar. “Come on.” He gestured rudely to Janco.

Janco scratched his head. Ari silently encouraged his partner to move. While fighting on top of a bar was rather unusual, he knew Janco could adapt.

“That certainly explains it,” Janco said as he joined the Lieutenant.

“Explains what?”

“The stains.” Janco pulled his sword.

“Stains?”

“I thought the brown stains on the wood had been caused by beer, but now I know they were caused by fear.”

The Lieutenant’s face creased in confusion. The man wasn’t smart enough to make the connection. It didn’t matter though. Once Janco moved, the Lieutenant had bigger worries.

Ari thought the narrow surface would hinder his partner. Janco enjoyed side-stepping his opponents. But Janco made creative use of the bar stools and unarmed the larger man in two moves.

“That’s pathetic. I’m beginning to think I’m too good for this town.” Janco continued to gloat to an obnoxious degree. Even Ari wanted to wipe that smirk off his face. The rest of the Lieutenant’s buddies lined up to teach the new guard a lesson.

With Janco busy, Ari scanned the crowd, keeping an eye out for Rye. The wait staff carried trays full of mugs to the patrons now the bar’s surface was being used. A few people scurried from the bar with their eyes lit and animated expressions on their faces. Ari hoped they would spread the word about Janco’s challenge.

Janco threw one of the reservists into the group of spectators. A wild delight shone on his face as cheers and jeers rose to deafening levels.

Ari rubbed his hand over his eyes. His partner would be near impossible to be with after tonight. To keep his gloating to a minimum, Ari hoped someone would give Janco a close match.

The tavern’s door swung open and a group of men and women tramped in. By the way they strained their necks to catch the action at the bar; Ari knew they came to watch the show. Before the door shut, a hand pushed it wide.

The fish arrived. Rye swaggered into the room as if he frequented the place on a regular basis. His casual and semi-bored expression failed to match the lines of tension in his neck and the vice-like grip on his sword’s hilt—Pemba’s hilt. The shape of the scabbard unmistakable. After finding a good position to view the fighters, Rye studied the action.

Ari didn’t waste time. He knew Rye would soon see through Janco’s disguise. His partner controlled his fondness for bursting into a fighting rhyme, but his quick jabs and graceful footwork would give him away.

Ari dipped the hollow metal tip of a dart into sleeping potion. Inserting the dart into a blow pipe, he aimed, drew breath and puffed.

Pemba appeared to jump from the scabbard. In a flash of movement, the scimitar deflected Ari's dart. Rye's hand may be clutched to the hilt, but it was obvious by the stunned open-mouth gape the man had no idea what had just happened.

Loading another dart, Ari tried again. No luck. Pemba blocked again, and now Rye's gaze locked on Ari. He drew his weapon and stood as Rye strode toward him.

"Resorting to an ambush, Ari?" Rye asked. "Ambushes are for the scared and for the weak. You're smart to be scared."

"And you'd be smart to address me as sir." Ari slid his feet into a fighting stance. He glanced past Rye's shoulder, hoping Janco had noticed them. His partner continued to fight an over-muscled guard, completely unaware.

"Looking for reinforcements?" Rye asked. "First an ambush and then you want to gang up on me. That's not fair."

"And wielding a magic sword is?"

"Did you figure it out on your own? Or have you hooked up with that Sandseed hovering about?" He inclined his head toward the back door. "I hope you're not depending on him for plan B. He's a bit...scattered right now."

Oh boy. A horrifying image of Bour chopped into pieces filled his mind as a cold fist of dread clutched his heart. Ari knew he couldn't match Pemba by himself. "Since you like fair. How about you put the scimitar down and use a regular sword? We could have a nice fair fight on the bar."

A brief flash of panicked helplessness flamed in Rye's eyes before the cold killer stare returned. "Nice try, but you've set the mood. A fair fight would be moot at this point."

"Fine. Then I'll call for help, and you'll have to fight every guard and reservist in the bar."

"Go ahead." Rye gestured to the crowd of people. "Half of them are drunk. They will hinder you more than help you, and Pemba will enjoy cutting into their skin as much as she will savor drinking your blood."

He had a point. Ari didn't want to endanger any one else. "Outside, then? Me and you?"

Rye smiled. "I'd thought you'd never ask."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Janco had seen Rye enter the bar, which meant their plan to entice Rye there had worked. But from the brief glances he could afford, he knew Ari's treated darts had missed Rye. Janco countered another lunge from his opponent. The clang of steel rang in the air and vibrated up his arm. The tired arm. He had been fighting one man after the other on this narrow bar for over an hour. He needed a break.

Only one way to get a break. Lose a match. A blow to his pride. A blow to his ego. He hesitated until he spotted Ari and Rye leave the bar through the front door. Which wouldn't normally be a problem; however Rye carried a magical scimitar called Pemba. Ari couldn't counter Pemba alone. So much for his pride.

Janco knew his opponent planned to unarm him with a thrust and parry combination. The guy wasn't too bright. He had tried that move six times before and it failed each time.

Suppressing a sigh, Janco allow his opponent the upper hand. He dropped his sword in defeat, then raised his arms and said, "Congrats, you won. Guess I learned my lesson." He swept up his sword and hopped off the bar. "Gotto go, fellows."

Amid cries of outrage, Janco dashed out the back door. The Sandseed magician who had traveled from Sitia to reclaim the scimitar, and who had recruited Ari and Janco to help, was supposed to be guarding the entrance.

Janco skidded to a stop. Deep slices criss-crossed Stripey's prone form, exposing muscles and bone. He bent over the Sandseed and closed the dead man's eyes. The lifeless gaze was scary, but what truly terrified Janco was the absence of blood. Not a drop oozed from the cuts, no splashes on the Sandseed's clothes, and no puddles on the ground. Pemba had absorbed it all.

Magic. Janco spat in disgust.

He raced around the building. A crowd surrounded Ari and Rye's fight, growing bigger as the bar's patrons spilled into the street to gawk. Janco pushed through them until he reached the edge.

One glance and he knew Ari wouldn't last long. Gashes marked Ari's thick forearms, blood stained his tattered pants, and sweat poured off his strained face. Before joining in the fight, Janco met Captain Kenton's gaze and nodded.

The bar had been filled with off-duty soldiers and reservists. Most were drunk, but the Captain had been informed about Rye. He and a few others had stayed sober. Since their first plan to prick Rye with a sleeping potion-laced dart failed, the Captain would be needed for plan B.

Janco stepped close to his partner and aimed a blow at Rye's mid-section. Pemba blurred into motion, countering the strike before Rye reacted. The scimitar controlled the man's actions, and the insane hunger shining in Rye's eyes meant the weapon also controlled his mind.

Ari grunted a greeting. "What took you...so long?" His breath huffed with the effort.

"I stopped for a snack, and ordered us a couple beers," Janco said. "We should finish him soon. I hate warm beer."

A snort of amusement from Ari, but even Janco grew quiet as they fought Rye. The scimitar blocked every thrust, lunge and attack. Pemba ignored all feints. All the while she snaked under their defenses and sliced into their skin. Little by little the number of cuts grew while he weakened.

The addition of Captain Kenton didn't slow Pemba down. Three more soldiers joined in. But the scimitar's movement created a zone around Rye. As if a bubble of glass surrounded him, protecting him. There seemed no way for their weapons to reach him.

Plan B sucked. Although it kept Rye and Pemba occupied, and gave each of them a turn to take a break, eventually one of them would make a mistake and die. They would be forced to give up and...what? Janco hated to surrender.

Time for plan C. Too bad they hadn't formulated plan C.

When Ari's broadsword flew from his grip, Janco called for a retreat. The soldiers engaged in the fighting stepped back as one. No longer under attack, Pemba stilled.

No sweat coated Rye's face. He wasn't even panting from the effort of defending against six men. Interesting.

"You can't stop," Rye said in a matter-of-fact tone. "A blood sacrifice must be made."

Time to slow events down and think. Unfortunately, thinking wasn't his strength. Janco glanced at his partner. Perhaps Ari would have an idea.

"Why do you want a sacrifice?" Ari asked.

"We need it," Rye said.

"What for?" Janco asked. "You're already unbeatable."

"Valek." The word hissed out between Rye's teeth.

Pain jabbed Janco where the lower half of his right ear used to be. He rubbed the scar. "Now, I'm not a genius—"

"Got that right," Ari mumbled.

He shot his partner a nasty look. "But how can increasing your magical power help you against Valek? He's—"

"Immune, I know. But if we're strong enough to slow him down, all we need is one single drop of his blood and his immunity will be gone." Rye advanced toward Janco.

Janco backed away. It galled him, but he needed to stall. "Hold on there, puppy dog. What's your beef with Valek?"

"He put my mother and me through hell after my father disappeared. Our house was under constant surveillance, preventing my father from returning to us for four years."

Click. An important clue fell into place and answered a question that should have been asked. How did Rye get Pemba?

"Your father has returned. Did he bring you Pemba?" Ari asked.

Rye pressed his lips together, refusing to answer.

Why would he give the scimitar to his son? He wouldn't. Janco suppressed the desire to do a little dance. "His father returned, all right. But not to see his son. To retrieve Pemba."

The puppy dog flinched for a second. Bingo. Time to add salt to the wound. "He didn't care about you or your mother," Janco said. "Left you without a backward glance. Probably has a new family in Sitia with lots of kids and a faithful dog."

Each sentence hit the mark. Color leaked from Rye's face.

"Then one day he uncovers information on an old scimitar he once owned. It could be the infamous Pemba. So he sneaks back into Ixia to get the weapon." Janco guessed the order of events. "He doesn't even want you or your mother to know he's there. But you see him and, after he tells you everything, you kill him in a fit of rage."

Ari looked impressed and, encouraged, Janco finished his tale. "Not wanting to take responsibility for

your actions, you blame Valek for the whole mess, and plot a way to exact revenge.”

“A fairy tale,” Rye said. “No proof, and it doesn’t change the fact you’re unable to stop us.”

Good point. Janco frowned. Magic sucked. He never knew where he stood and magicians had an unfair advantage. Reading minds, moving objects, healing people, and... Click.

Janco signaled Ari to follow his lead. He glanced at his partner with a surprised smile. “Talk about good timing!” He peered over Rye’s shoulder. “Hey Valek, we were just talking about you,” he called, keeping a firm vision of Valek armed with a broadsword in his mind.

Rye swung around. Janco motioned to Ari, then stepped close to Rye. The young pup barely countered the attack.

“Nice try, but it won’t help you,” Rye said.

But Janco tuned him out. His mind flashed a chaotic array of images. He allowed instinct and years of experience to guide his movements while his thoughts hopped with random abandon.

Pemba used illusion. If Rye had actually fought six men, he would have been at least sweaty and red-faced. Combine illusion with the ability to read minds, and the result was one unbeatable opponent.

Unless you don’t think and don’t see. Janco kept his gaze on Rye’s shoulders, letting the boy’s real movements be picked up by his subconscious, trusting his training.

“Aiming high,” Ari shouted.

Janco ducked, imagining his partner pointing a blow pipe at Rye’s neck. Pemba moved to block the dart from Ari. Without thought, Janco yanked a dart from his belt and stabbed it into Rye’s leg.

Ten harrowing seconds of dodging the scimitar’s thrusts before Rye collapsed on top of Janco. Pemba knocked from his grip on impact.

Ari pulled the sleeping man off him. Brushing the dirt from his pants, Janco stood.

“How’d you keep him from chopping you into ground beef?” Ari asked.

“You know how you’re always yelling at me for not focusing and staying on topic for more than a few seconds?”

“You actually listened to my advice?”

“No. I only listen to good advice. I did what I do best.”

“Be a scatter-brained annoyance?”

Janco pouted at Ari’s word choice. “It worked.”

His partner stared at the sleeping man. “Can’t argue with that.” Ari touched the row of gashes along his forearm. “Heck of an illusion. That’s the second time you’ve seen through it.”

He puffed out his chest. “I might not be immune to magic. But I can outwit it!”

Ari rolled his eyes as Janco danced around. After his little performance, he bent to pick up Pemba.

“Don’t touch it!” Ari yelled.

He yanked his hand back. “Oh. Right.”

Ari sighed. “Just what I need. A variable-speed genius.”

The End